BRYDEN HENRY ANDERSON

THE GOLD KLOOF

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Содержание

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Chapter I.
SCHOOL DAYS

It was a fine, hot July day on the banks of the Severn river at Tewkesbury, that quaint, old-world, and somewhat decayed town, which offers to the inspection of the visitor and the archæologist some of the most ancient and interesting buildings to be seen in any part of broad England. There was some stir on the banks of the river, for two public schools, one of them situate in the west of England, the other hailing from a Midland shire, were about to contest with one another in their annual boat race. From the Western school a considerable contingent of lads had come over; these were discussing, with the enthusiasm of schoolboys, the prospects of the races. On the banks, gathered near the winning-post, were also to be seen a number of other spectators, some from the town itself, others from the neighbouring country-side.

The fateful moment at length had come; the two boats were to be seen in the distance, their oarsmen battling with one another with all the desperate energy that youth and strength and an

invincible determination could put into their task. As they drew nearer it was to be seen that the Midland school was leading by nearly half a length. A quarter of a mile remained to be rowed. Loud cries from the Western school resounded along the banks. Hope struggled against hope in every youthful breast; yet it seemed that if the oarsmen of the Western school were to make that final effort for which they were famous, it was now almost too late. But, no! the Western stroke is seen to be calling upon his crew; their flashing blades dip quicker, and yet quicker; they are well together, all apparently animated by the vigour and the reserve of force displayed by their leader. Foot by foot they diminish the lead of their adversaries, who are striving desperately, yet ineffectually, to retain their advantage. A hundred yards from the winning-post the Western lads are level; and as the post is passed they have defeated their adversaries, after one of the finest races ever rowed between the two schools, by a quarter of a length.

Amid the exultant and tremendous cheering that now greets the triumph of the Western school, both crews paddle to the boat-house and disembark. The boats are got out and housed, and all but the Western captain and stroke, Guy Hardcastle, are inside the boathouse, bathing and changing their clothes. Guy Hardcastle, a strong, well-set-up lad of seventeen, lingers on the platform in conversation with his house-master, Mr. Brimley-Fair, who has come down to congratulate him on his victory. He is a good-looking lad, fresh complexioned, with fair brown hair, a

firm mouth, and a pair of steady, blue-gray eyes, which look the world frankly in the face, with an aspect of candour, friendliness, and self-reliance that most people find very attractive.

While master and boy are talking together for a brief minute or two, a sudden cry comes from the river, followed by others. They look that way, and see instantly the reason of the outcry. Some country people, rowing across from the other side, are evidently not accustomed to boating. Two of them attempt to change places in mid-stream: they are womenfolk; they become alarmed and shift in their places, the heavily laden boat is upset, and half a dozen people are struggling in the water.

Guy Hardcastle is nothing if not prompt. His resolution is instantly taken. He is in his light rowing kit, well prepared for swimming. Kicking off his shoes, he dives neatly into the water, and swims rapidly upstream towards the group of struggling people sixty yards away. Of these, three are clinging to the boat; one man is swimming for the shore with a child; the sixth, a girl of fourteen, has just sunk ten yards beyond the boat down-stream. Her danger is manifestly great and imminent. Boats are putting off from the bank, but they may be too late. Guy Hardcastle, surveying the disaster with cool eye as he swims that way, has concentrated all his energies on this drowning and terror-stricken girl. He is within fifteen yards of where she sank; and now, a few seconds later, just as the girl, now partly insensible, comes to the surface again, he grasps her firmly, turns her over on her back-a task of some difficulty-and, himself also swimming on his back,

tows her towards the bank. It is not an easy task. The girl is no light weight, encumbered as she is with soddened clothing; the stream is strong, and Guy himself is by no means so fresh as he might have been, after that hard and exhausting race of a few minutes since. Still, with invincible determination, the plucky lad struggles with his burden towards the boat-house. Help comes unexpectedly. His house-master, Mr. Brimley-Fair, has foreseen his difficulties, and, jumping into a dingy, has rowed out to his assistance. Presently he is alongside.

"Here you are, Hardcastle," he cries; "catch hold of her side!"

Guy clutches with one hand at the boat's gunwale, and feels that he and his burden are now pretty safe.

"Now, hang on while I row you in," says Mr. Brimley-Fair, "and we'll soon have you all right."

Guy does as he is told, and in fifty strokes the boathouse is reached, and girl and rescuer are safe. A storm of cheering, greater even than that which greeted the winning of the boat race, now testifies to the gallantry of the boy's second feat and the relief of all that the girl is safe. Meanwhile, the remainder of the overturned crew have been rescued by boats rowed from the bank.

Arrived at the boat-house, willing hands hung on to the dingy while Mr. Brimley-Fair stepped out of her. Then, bringing her side gently to the platform, they grasped Guy Hardcastle and his burden and lifted them into safety. The girl was pale and insensible, but she breathed; a doctor was quickly in attendance;

and after the usual restorative methods had been applied for a quarter of an hour, the patient came round, was carried to a neighbouring hotel, put to bed, and by the evening was well enough to be taken home.

After the doctor had taken charge of the half-drowned girl, Mr. Brimley-Fair turned his attention to Guy Hardcastle, still dripping from his immersion.

"Now, my boy," he said, kindly patting him on the shoulder, "you have done splendidly. That was a plucky thing to do. You remembered all your life-saving lessons-which some of the boys seem to think a bore-and deserve, and I hope will get, the Humane Society's Medal. But, medal or no medal, you did your duty and a brave thing, and we are all proud of you. Now go and get your clothes off and a rub down. You look tired and chilled, as well you may, after rowing that fine race and saving a girl's life. I've sent for some brandy, and you'll soon be all right again."

"All right, sir," said the boy, cheerful though shivering. "I shall be quite fit as soon as I get into my clothes."

The brandy soon arrived, and the lad was given a small quantity in some water. Thoroughly dried and rubbed down, he was, not long after, clothed and comfortable again, and quite equal to doing his duty by his adversaries of the recent boat race, who with his own schoolmates were loud in admiration of his latest feat.

The rival crews had some food together, under the chairmanship of Mr. Brimley-Fair; and later on, the Midland

crew having been seen off at the station, the Western lads took train for their own school.

About ten days after these events, Guy Hardcastle received news that altered the whole course of his life. The son of a mining engineer, whose duties took him much away from England into distant parts of the world, the lad had had the misfortune to lose his mother at a very early age. He lived during his vacations with an aunt, a sister of his father's, a Miss Hardcastle, who lived at a quiet country house in the county of Durham. Beyond two families of cousins living in the same county, the lad had few other relatives in England. He had, however, an Uncle Charles, his mother's only brother, living in South Africa, who came home occasionally to England, and to whom he was greatly attached. In fact, next to his father, the lad looked upon his Uncle Charles as his greatest friend. Guy was now a month or two past seventeen. He had been four years at his present school, where he was an immense favourite. Captain of the rowing club, he had not time or opportunity to devote himself, as he would have liked, to cricket, and was not therefore in the eleven. But he was in the twenty-two. He was also a distinguished member of the football team, and a good athlete. At the last sports he had won the mile in the record time for his school of four minutes forty-nine seconds, and had, in addition, carried off the half-mile, the quarter-mile, and the grand steeplechase. Winning as well the long jump and throwing the cricket ball, he was easily *victor ludorum* in the school sports.

Although not a brilliantly clever boy, he was possessed of quite average brains. He was, in addition, a steady and consistent worker, with the result that he was now in the highest form in the school, on the modern side, and a prefect. A thoroughly good stamp of an English schoolboy, excellent at work, keen at games, good tempered, reliable, and steady, Guy Hardcastle was undoubtedly all round the most popular boy in the school. He owed not a little of his popularity to his character, which was strong, simple, and always to be relied upon. His schoolfellows knew that he hated meanness and lying; that he was the foe of the bully and the sneak; that the side he took was the side always of truth and honour and duty. In his own house his force of character and his steady example had insensibly created within the last year or so a vast improvement in the whole tone and spirit of the community of fifty boys; and his house-master, Mr. Brimley-Fair, well knew how valuable an ally he had in the boy, in those directions where the precepts and admonitions of the master are not always able to penetrate.

Guy Hardcastle expected at this period to have another year of school life. After that time it was his father's intention to send him to the School of Mines in Jermyn Street, London, to prepare him for the profession of a mining engineer, which he himself followed. The fateful news that Guy received came to him one morning in a letter which, by the handwriting, postmark, and stamp, he knew was from his Uncle Charles, in British Bechuanaland. The first few lines read by him as he sat at

breakfast turned his ruddy cheek pale. He read no further, but thrust the letter into his pocket, hurriedly finished his meal, and went to his study. There he took out the letter again, and, sadly and with a clouded brow, perused the contents, which were as follows: -

"BAMBOROUGH FARM, NEAR MAFEKING,

BRITISH BECHUANALAND,

May 4, 1896

"MY DEAR GUY, – I am grieved indeed to have bad news to send you-the worst, in fact, that I could possibly have to write. Your dear father died two months since at Abaquessa, some two hundred miles up country from Cape Coast Castle, where, as you know, he was at work opening up a mine. This is a sad blow for us all, more especially for you, who lose your nearest and dearest relative, and one of the best and kindest of fathers. I need not tell you how much I mourn his loss. He was a very old and dear friend of mine, and the fact that he married my sister, Helen, rendered our friendship yet a closer one.

"Your father's agent at Cape Coast Castle has forwarded me

all his papers and belongings, including two letters written to me by your father shortly before his death. From these two letters, and from Mr. Delvine's accounts, I gather that your father had had repeated attacks of the dangerous malarial fever which is so fatal on the West Coast. From the last of these he never recovered. In his last two letters to me, which I enclose for your perusal, he seems to have had a foreboding that he would not recover; and in the very last (the few lines in pencil, written the day before his death) he asks me to take charge of you and look after you till you are able to manage your own affairs. You know, my dear Guy, how glad and willing I shall be to do whatever I can for you, and what a pleasure to us it will be to see you out here, if it shall hereafter be settled that you come.

"From what your father has told me, he has left behind him some £2,000. This will, of course, come to you, under the terms of the will, at the age of twenty-one. Meantime, you are to have the interest for your maintenance. I need hardly point out to you that your father's death makes a great difference in your future prospects. He earned a fairly good income during his life, and had at one time saved considerably more money than he now leaves. Some unfortunate investments, and the very heavy expenses of that patent lawsuit in which he was engaged-trying vainly, as it turned out, to protect a very unique invention of his own in connection with the concentration and chlorination of pyrites-reduced his savings very considerably; and instead of some £5,000, which might have been looked for three or four

years ago, you now only succeed, as I say, to about £2,000.

"In his last two letters your father, as you will see, told me that he had decided not to enter you into his own profession of a mining engineer. He had come to the conclusion that the life is too precarious a one; that although a man, if he is lucky, can occasionally make a big income, yet the prizes are few and the risks very great. The life is a hard one, as he points out. A mining engineer has to take his chance in all parts of the world; too often his work is cast in a pestilential climate, and, if he escapes death, his health and constitution are, as often as not, completely ruined by the time he reaches middle age. Your father believed-and rightly, as it turned out-that the West Coast mining on which he was engaged, handsomely though he was paid, would be the death of him sooner or later, and was very sorry he had accepted the appointment. However, he was under a contract, and could not well throw up his engagement; and the fever has, alas, proved, as it has for so many other good men, the death of him.

"He reiterated, as you will see, in both these letters, the wish that, in case of his death, you should come out here to me and learn farming. He says, very rightly, that the life is a healthy one; that a man can do fairly well if he is steady and sticks to business; and that he is convinced that you, with your open-air inclinations and active habits, would do very well in it. You will have enough to start you fairly when you are ready to take up land of your own. Your father knew, of course, that if you came out here, as I hope you may do, you would live with us at small expense-as

a matter of fact I shall see that it costs you nothing-and that you would have a fair chance of learning stock-farming, and would be well looked after.

"Now, my dear boy, I want you to think over these things; to discuss them with your house-master, Mr. Brimley-Fair, whom I had the pleasure of meeting two years ago when I was home, and with your Aunt Effie, and make up your mind what you think you would like to do in the world. Your father has left me your guardian, but I don't want to press my own ideas too much. I want you to think over your father's wishes, and give me your own view of what you hope to do with your life. If you wish to stay on another year at school, I will see that the thing shall be managed. If, on the contrary, you desire to come out here to us, and take up the business of stock-farming, I think it will be better to leave after this term. I have written Mr. Brimley-Fair, pointing out your altered circumstances, and arranging that, if necessary, the usual quarter's notice shall be dispensed with. You will be going to your Aunt Effie's at the end of the term for your holidays. You and she must talk things over, and if you settle to come out here she will help you to fit yourself out and see you off.

"You will understand that I don't want to make a point of your throwing in your lot with me and taking to my business of farming out here. I want you to think well over the pros and cons. I don't know whether you have ever thought of any other line of life. I would remind you, however, that doctoring and the law

require a long and expensive apprenticeship of five years at least before you can earn money for yourself; that you cannot afford an army career; and that you are now too old for the navy. From what I know of you, I don't fancy you would take very readily to the career of a bank clerk, or a clerk in a merchant's office.

"If you do settle to join us here, I can only say that we shall all have the very heartiest welcome for you, and that I shall do my best to fit you for the life of a South African farmer.

"Now, my dear Guy, I must finish. With our deepest sympathy in your heavy loss, and our kindest love, – Believe me, your affectionate Uncle, C. F. BLAKENEY."

From this letter, which, it may well be imagined, Guy Hardcastle read with the saddest feelings, he turned to the enclosures-his father's last letters to his Uncle Charles. He himself had received, three weeks since, a most kind and affectionate letter from his father, written only a week before the first of these two forwarded by his uncle. In this letter his father, although mentioning that he had been down with fever, had said nothing to his boy of the fears which he had expressed to Mr. Blakeney. Guy could see well enough now, as he read the two last letters, that his father had wished to spare him any anxiety. The perusal of these two letters received by his uncle, and the tidings of his father's death; the remembrances of the happy days that he had had with him; his unvarying good temper and cheerfulness and thought for him-all these things brought the tears welling to the boy's eyes. Sad was it, indeed, to think that he should never

again set eyes upon that strong and active form; never look into those keen blue eyes; never be able to depend upon that firm mind and excellent judgment, which hitherto had always been at his disposal.

After dinner on the following day, Guy, instead of going out with his schoolfellows to their usual games, stayed behind in the house and waited for a summons from Mr. Brimley-Fair, who had already spoken a few kind words to him, sympathizing in his heavy loss, and telling him he would be prepared to talk over matters with him after a day's interval. He was presently sent for. His house-master laid his hand kindly on the lad's shoulder and put him into a chair.

"This is a very sad business, Hardcastle," he said. "I know what a loss yours is. Nothing, no other friend, can replace a good father, do what we can. I think you know that I feel with you most sincerely in your trouble. I knew your father, and liked and respected him much; and I had as little idea as yourself that he was so soon to be taken from you."

The tears came to Guy's eyes at these words; his feelings were too much for him; he could just then say nothing. His master noticed the lad's trouble, and went on.

"But we are now face to face with quite a different set of circumstances from those of forty-eight hours ago. You have to go out into the world, not, thanks to your Uncle Charles, quite alone, but with the knowledge that for the future you have to rely mainly upon your own exertions in the battle which we all have

to fight. I have had a long letter from your uncle; it contains very much the same information that he has sent you. I have purposely left you a day for reflection before talking things over. I have always looked upon you as a sensible fellow. What are your ideas as to the future?"

Guy had had time to recover himself, as his master intended he should. He was now able to answer in a fairly collected voice.

"Well, sir, I have thought over things the greater part of the last day and night, and the conclusion I have come to is, that I should prefer above all things to go out to Bechuanaland and join my uncle. My reasons are best expressed, I think, by the last part of my uncle's letter to me."

He showed the letter to Mr. Brimley-Fair, who read it carefully.

"Well," said the house-master, "there is a great deal in what your uncle says, and you are certainly restricted in your choice of a profession or business. Still, your ideas may alter. Don't be in a hurry."

"No, sir," the boy went on firmly, "my mind is quite made up, and I don't think anything will alter it. My uncle's life, which I know a good deal about, will, I am certain, suit me better than any other occupation. I should like it above all things. Of course I shall hear what my Aunt Effie-Miss Hardcastle, I mean-has to say, but I am convinced I shall not change my opinion."

Miss Hardcastle came down from the north during the following week, and Guy's future was again seriously and

thoroughly discussed. In the end, all three parties-Miss Hardcastle, Mr. Brimley-Fair, and Guy Hardcastle-agreed that he, Guy, could not do better than go out to his uncle and take up the life of a farmer in South Africa.

Guy left that term, to the general regret of his schoolfellows, his house-master, and, a much more important personage, the headmaster of the school. In the following September, having chosen his modest kit and belongings, as advised by his Uncle Charles, Guy sailed for South Africa in the fine Cape liner, the *Tantallon Castle*. He had an excellent passage, and landed at Cape Town in the second week in October.

Chapter II.
BAMBOROUGH FARM

At Cape Town Guy was met by his uncle, who had come down country to welcome him. The greeting was an affectionate one on both sides, for uncle and nephew were much attached to one another.

"My word, Guy," said Mr. Blakeney, as he shook his nephew by the hand, and looked him up and down, "you have grown since I saw you at home two years ago. What height are you now?"

"Five foot ten, uncle," returned Guy, smiling; "and my weight is eleven stone four. I don't want to grow any taller."

"Well, you're about tall enough," said Mr. Blakeney; "but I expect you'll put on another inch before you've done, and you're bound to be a twelve stone five man when you're full grown. I'm heartily glad to see you, and so will your aunt and cousins be when you reach Bamborough. As for Tom, he's dying to have a look at his cousin, of whom he has heard so much. By the way, my boy, I have to congratulate you on saving that girl from drowning at Tewkesbury in July last. Mr. Brimley-Fair told me about it in a letter shortly after, and sent me an account of it in a local paper. We're all very proud of you; and you are, I can see, like your father, a good plucked one. Mr. Brimley-Fair says you are pretty sure to get the Humane Society's medal later on, and

indeed you deserve it after so gallant a feat."

"Please, uncle, don't say another word about it," said Guy, reddening at Mr. Blakeney's words. "I only did what any other fellow would have done. I was nearest to the girl, and you must remember I was already stripped-or nearly stripped-for rowing."

"Yes, I remember that, my boy," rejoined his uncle, with a kindly pat on the shoulder. "But I remember, too, that you had just had a very hard and exhausting struggle in the boat race you won, and were scarcely in fit condition to rescue people from drowning. Well, now, we'll get your luggage off the ship, drive up to the International Hotel, have some lunch, and then look about the town. I have some business in Cape Town which will keep me two or three days. During that time we'll have a look round, and you shall see what there is to be seen."

Mr. Blakeney was as good as his word. He showed Guy the sights of the old Dutch town, one of the most picturesque cities in the world. They drove round by the wonderful Victoria Drive, thence home by Wynberg and Rondebosch. At Wynberg they had a look at Great Constantia, the Government wine farm, a fine old Cape mansion, once the abode of the Cloete family. At Rondebosch they paid a visit to Groot Schuur, and Guy was shown the various trophies and curiosities of Mr. Rhodes's well-known mansion. Another day they went over the Kloof to Kamp's Bay; and on yet another they climbed the four thousand feet of Table Mountain, and from that magnificent altitude gazed over one of the grandest scapes by sea and land to be witnessed in any

part of the world.

On the fifth day after Guy's arrival they took the up-country train, and after spending two days and nights on the rail, and passing Beaufort West, the Orange River, Kimberley, and Vryburg, reached Mafeking. During the journey Guy Hardcastle was never weary of gazing at the strange and varied scenery that unfolded itself before his eyes. He noted the wild mountain country through which they climbed before reaching the plateau of the Great Karroo. He watched the barren and seemingly illimitable vastness of the flat, red Karroo plains; saw wild springbucks and tame ostriches; and feasted his eyes on the huge chain of mountain, the magnificent Zwartberg, which for scores of leagues reared its mighty ramparts to the south of the plain country, until lost in the dim distance a hundred miles away to the eastward. He noted, too, the extraordinary clearness of the atmosphere. Hills and mountains that were, as his uncle assured him, forty or fifty miles away, appeared in this sparkling and translucent atmosphere little more than a dozen or fifteen miles distant.

"Yes, Guy," added his uncle, "you'll find this clearness of the atmosphere rather troublesome at first, when you begin rifle-shooting. The game on the plains are much farther off than newcomers can believe; and the consequence is that, until they get used to our conditions of light and atmosphere, sportsmen fresh to the country invariably underestimate their distances, and fire far short of the buck, or whatever it may be they are aiming

at. By the way, have you ever fired a rifle?"

"Yes," replied the boy quietly, "I have had some practice with the Martini-Henry at butts, and did pretty well for a beginner; and, as you know, I've used a shot-gun ever since I was twelve years old. I began with small birds and rabbits; two years ago I shot partridge with father-he was home that autumn; and last year I was grouse-shooting with our cousins, the Forsters, in Northumberland.

"By the way, uncle," he went on, "I've brought out a sporting Martini-Henry rifle, as you told me. That and the ammunition are packed up in the long case with my saddlery and the rest of my outfit. Here's my shot-gun," he continued, taking down a gun-case from the rack above, undoing it, and extracting from it a handsome double-barrel. "It's a beauty, isn't it? Father gave it me two years ago on my birthday. It's a 'Cogswell and Harrison,' and a first-rate shooter."

Mr. Blakeney was a keen sportsman, and naturally took an interest in every kind of firearm. He took the gun, which Guy had meanwhile put together, examined it carefully, handled it, balanced it, and standing up in the first-class carriage, which they had to themselves, put it up to his shoulder two or three times.

"Yes, it's a very pretty gun, well built and finished, Guy," he remarked. "You'll have plenty of opportunity of using it at Bamborough. We have lots of feathered game: partridges, pheasants (both of them a kind of francolin), koorhaan-that is, bustards-of various kinds, and numbers of wild guinea-fowl.

Then there are plover, "dikkop," and so forth; sand-grouse, wild fowl, when the rains fall and the pans and vleis are full, and various other odds and ends."

"My word, uncle," said Guy eagerly, "this is splendid news. I'm especially fond of bird-shooting, and I had no idea you had all this variety."

Meantime, Mr. Blakeney had in his turn been looking for a gun-case, which he extracted, after no little trouble, from under the seat. He took out his keys, opened the case, and quickly put together a light small-bore sporting rifle.

"Here's a little surprise I had in store for you, Guy," he said. "We have a deal of time to put in on this journey, and I may as well make the best of it. This is one of the newest small-bore magazine rifles, a sporting Mannlicher, which an old friend of mine, who has tested it, tells me is the best weapon he knows for all kinds of buck up to a hartebeest or koodoo, or even an eland. I sent down to George Rawbone of Cape Town to get it out from England for me. Tom and I each have a Lee-Metford .303 sporting rifle. This, I believe, is even better. It's from Holland and Holland in Bond Street, and it ought to be a good one. There you are, my boy," he added, putting it into his nephew's hands. "I hope you'll like it, and will shoot many a head of game with it. I've got plenty of ammunition for you."

Guy's face had lit up with pleasure as his uncle handed him the weapon.

"It's awfully good of you, uncle," he said; "I can't thank you

enough. It's a lovely rifle," he continued, as he handled the weapon and tried the mechanism. "If I can't shoot with that, I deserve to be shot myself. I've heard one of our fellows talk of the Mannlicher. His father shoots red deer with it in Scotland, and he says it's a splendid rifle. I'm afraid my Martini-Henry, with its black powder, will have its nose rather put out of joint by this beauty."

"No, I don't think so," replied his uncle. "You will find the Martini still a very useful rifle, although, compared with the new smokeless powder weapons, it produces a lot of smoke, makes a big noise, and has a nasty kick. Some day, when you go into the hunting veldt, you will find it a very good second rifle in reserve; and it's always well to have a spare arm in case anything goes wrong with your first choice and favourite. The Martini bullet delivers a heavy, smashing blow; and I'm not sure whether for lion, leopard, and elephant, and giraffe and the heavier game, I should not still prefer it."

They presently crossed the Orange River, and passed into Griqualand West. Kimberley was reached and left behind; in no great while they passed Fourteen Streams, and entered the rolling grass-veldt country of British Bechuanaland. Vryburg, the little capital of this colony, was presently left behind; and, a hundred miles farther north, they alighted, after their long journey, at Mafeking. Here they stayed the night at Dixon's Hotel.

Mafeking still showed some faint remnants of the excitement which had overtaken it when, some ten months earlier, Dr.

Jameson and his raiders had marched from that neighbourhood on their madcap and ill-starred attempt upon the Transvaal. That evening, after dinner, Guy heard occasional references to that period, which interested him not a little. He saw, too, for the first time, some Transvaal Boers, who were in the town selling stock and buying various things that they required. Guy watched these men with a curious and a critical eye. So these were the people with whom England for a hundred years had had so much trouble and so many difficulties. As he watched the big burly fellows-slack and loose-limbed and clumsy they seemed to him, with their rough corduroy clothes, loose trousers, short jackets, slouch hats, great beards, and generally unkempt appearance-it was hard to realize that these were the men who had defeated British troops at Majuba Hill, Laing's Nek, and other places.

He listened to their thick guttural language with astonished interest.

"What a strange lingo," he said to his uncle quietly, after the latter had been discussing cattle and crops with some of the Transvaalers.

"Yes," replied Mr. Blakeney, "it's a queer patois till you get accustomed to it. But you'll have to pick it up, uncouth as it sounds. One can hardly get on in this country without it. All the natives who work for Europeans speak it; and what with transport-riders and Dutch farmers all over the place-most of whom can hardly speak a word of English-one finds it absolutely necessary to acquire Boer Dutch."

"All right, uncle," said Guy, with his usual keenness, "I'll begin as soon as you like."

"Very well," rejoined Mr. Blakeney; "Tom and I will be your tutors. You will not be long before you pick up a fair colloquial knowledge of the language. After all, many of the words are practically identical with much of our Lowland Scotch. *Kist*, the word for chest, for example, is identical with the Scottish word. *Lang* stands for long in both countries. *Kloof*, a ravine, is the same as the Lowland *cleugh*. *Pat* means path or road, and so on. Their word *spoor*, which means tracks or footprints, is identical with an old-fashioned provincial word still in use in England. Otter hunters, for example, often call it the spur of an otter, when they see the prints of these animals in the smooth mud or sand of a riverside."

Mr. Blakeney had had his Cape cart and four horses sent in to meet them, and next morning at dawn they started on the forty-mile drive south-westward which was to land them at Bamborough Farm. Taking with them their gunnery and some ammunition, as well as Mr. Blakeney's and Guy's portmanteaus, they left behind the rest of Guy's kit and impedimenta, which were to be sent on, with some goods and farm implements, by ox-wagon. Having driven for some two and a half hours, they outspanned for breakfast. Peetsi, Mr. Blakeney's Bechuana groom, quickly collected some thorn wood and made a fire; they cooked a kettle of coffee, fried some tinned sausages in a tiny saucepan, got out bread, butter, and a tin of marmalade, and

made an excellent meal. Never, thought Guy, had he enjoyed a breakfast so much. Meanwhile the horses, on being unharnessed, had indulged in the invariable roll which all Cape nags make a point of on being off-saddled or outspanned, and were knee-haltered. This operation was closely observed by Guy, at his uncle's suggestion. It is an extremely useful one, which any newcomer to the South African veldt ought to make himself master of. Knee-haltered, the horse can graze comfortably, yet cannot wander far away. Guy watched Peetsi's operations, and then, after one or two vain attempts, secured two of the horses himself.

"Well done, Guy!" said his uncle approvingly. "Nothing like picking up these things as soon as possible. You'll do, I can see. Once a man learns how to knee-halter a nag, he never forgets it. It's like running or skating, or riding or dancing-once mastered, never forgotten."

The horses were given a feed of forage, which consists of the ears and stalks of oats cut up and eaten together-"oat-hay" some people call it-and then grazed for half an hour in the long grass veldt. The sun was becoming hot, and the travellers now doffed their coats and went, as most people do up-country, in their shirt sleeves.

Presently they inspanned again and drove off. Now they were approaching a belt of charming forest country, low, spreading, umbrella-shaped giraffe-acacia timber, planted by nature not too thickly together. Everywhere among these trees grew the tall,

pale, yellow veldt grass, and pleasant vistas and open glades here and there greeted the eye. Amid these trees fluttered occasionally queer, bizarre-looking hornbills, and brilliant rollers, miscalled "blue-jays" by the colonists, blazing in lovely plumage of many hues-blues, lilacs, purples, and greens. For an hour they drove through this pleasant country, and then emerged upon the dry, rolling grass plains once more. Half an hour later they approached a small shallow valley, through which ran the dry bed of a periodical stream. Along the banks of this dry stream grew a fringe of thorn bush, the common doom boom, or thorny acacia. Suddenly Mr. Blakeney pulled up his team.

"Sh!" he said in a low tone, handing the reins to Guy, and reaching out the Mannlicher, which now stood against the seat behind him. "Follow the line of bush yonder," he continued, pointing with his right hand. "Do you see anything?"

"Yes," replied Guy; "I see a big bird. What is it?"

"That's a paauw, my boy," answered his uncle; "our biggest bustard. You must have a try for him."

Taking some cartridges from a bandolier that hung at the side of the cart, Mr. Blakeney filled the magazine clip and pushed it into its place. Then he worked a cartridge into the breech.

"Now, Guy," he went on, "jump down there, creep up behind that bush, and try for a shot. You know the mechanism. If you miss with the first, have a blaze with your second cartridge. You won't get nearer than a hundred yards. Take your time, and don't hurry your shot."

Guy slipped down quietly, and, stooping low, crept towards the bush his uncle had pointed out. The paauw still fed quietly along the spruit: it was some two hundred and fifty yards from the cart, and the cunning creature, judging the distance to a nicety, esteemed itself quite secure. But, meanwhile, the eager lad with the Mannlicher was creeping up, the wind was right, and it seemed that he might attain his vantage-ground without the alert bird becoming aware of him. Now he is within forty yards of the bush, now thirty, now ten. He is there. Cautiously peering through the leafy screen, and dropping on to his right knee, he takes steady aim and fires.

The report of the Mannlicher was a light one, and its smoke very trifling. The big bird staggered to the shot, half lifted its wings, ran fifteen paces, and then dropped to the veldt dead. A shout of triumph rang out from Mr. Blakeney's lips.

"Bravo! bravo! my boy," he cried in stentorian tones. "You've done the trick beautifully."

Long before the words were out of his uncle's mouth, Guy, scarcely able to contain his exultation at this his first success, threw his hat into the air, leaped out of the bush, and ran like a deer up to the dead bustard. He picked it up-it seemed enormously heavy-and held it up in triumph. Then turning he walked swiftly back towards the cart. His uncle met him at the bush, clapped him on the back, and said heartily, -

"Well hit, Guy! A first-rate shot. I can see you don't want much coaching in the art of rifle-shooting. It isn't every day we

get a paauw."

He took the great bird from the lad, and, holding it out, tested its weight. "He's a beauty," he went on; "fat, and in high condition. Can't weigh less than thirty pounds. Handsome bird, isn't he? Look at his crest. That's the biggest and finest bustard in the world-*kori* the Bechuanas call him.

"Now let us pace the distance," he continued.

They paced it from the bush to the spot where the bird had been hit. Just one hundred and five yards it was, at a rough computation.

"A good shot, Guy," repeated his uncle. "And you kept your head and didn't hurry it. Well, we shall dine excellently. Your aunt and cousins will be as pleased as Punch to see that paauw; it's by far the best eating of any game-bird in Africa."

They reached the cart again. Peetsi, with beaming face, exclaimed in smooth Bechuana at the kori, and fastened the great bird up at the back of the cart, under the shade of the hood. Then they resumed their journey. Half an hour farther on, Mr. Blakeney got down from the cart, shot-gun in hand this time. He had noticed a koorhaan, one of the lesser bustards, go down at a certain spot in the veldt on the left-hand side of the road. In approaching the place where the bird lay concealed, he executed a circling movement. Smaller and smaller became the circle, and then, suddenly, without a cry of warning, a biggish bird flushed from the long grass and flew off. In an instant the sportsman's gun was at his shoulder. Then came the crisp report of a Schultz

cartridge, and the bird instantly fell to the shot. Mr. Blakeney walked forward to pick it up. As he did so a second bird, the hen, rose almost from under his feet. Giving her twenty-five yards law, again the gunner pulled the trigger, and the second game-bird hit the earth. It was a pretty scene-the wide yellow plain; the gunner standing knee deep in grass; the stricken bird, outlined clear against the hot sky. Giving the reins to Peetsi once more, Guy sprang out of the cart and ran to meet his uncle.

"Well, that was a pretty bit of shooting, uncle!" he cried joyfully. "I'm glad I saw it. I shall know what to do when I see a koorhaan go down and squat as that one did."

"That's a blue-necked koorhaan," answered his uncle; "one of our most beautiful bustards. Look at its lovely colouring and plumage-the bright rufous back, marked with black; the bluish tinge on the neck; and the tints, rufous, ash-colour, white and black, of the head and neck. And how splendidly the black wing feathers and the white underparts contrast with the rest of the plumage."

Guy took the two birds, which were each about the size of a blackcock, and walked with his uncle back to the cart. They drove on now, with a couple more outspans to rest the horses, until at length, turning a corner of some bush, Mr. Blakeney suddenly pointed with his whip and said, "There's Bamborough!"

Guy looked, and saw at the top of a gentle slope, which rose above a well-bushed river valley, a long, low, square-built house, having a raised veranda, or stoep as it is called in South Africa,

running all round it. In a mile they had crossed the dry river-bed, ascended the slope, and driven up to the place. It was just upon two o'clock. Mrs. Blakeney, a pleasant, comely-looking matron, came out of the house, and greeted her nephew so soon as he descended. She had not seen him since he was a small child.

"Of course, I should not have known you, Guy," she said. "What a giant you have grown! I shall be very proud of my good-looking nephew."

Then the cousins had to be introduced-Tom, the eldest boy, a fine-looking lad of eighteen, like his father, lean, dark, and wiry; two pretty, fresh-looking girls of fifteen and thirteen, Ella and Marjory; and Arthur, the youngest of the group, a sharp-looking boy of eleven. The greetings over, Mrs. Blakeney took them at once into dinner, which she had kept back, trusting to her husband's invariable speed and punctuality, even on a forty-mile drive.

In the afternoon they sauntered round the place, and Guy was shown everything there was to be seen. Bamborough was a typical South African homestead of the better sort. It consisted of a large single-story building, thatched by natives with grass, the exterior rough-cast and white-washed. There were ten good-sized rooms, which served for all the needs of the family and left a couple of spare beds for those not infrequent occasions when visitors or wayfarers turned up. A governess, who resided with the family, looked after the education of the girls and Arthur. Tom, who had just finished his schooling at Grahamstown, in

Cape Colony, was now home for good. His father, who farmed twelve thousand morgen of land, or rather more than twenty-four thousand acres, needed assistance, and was glad to have his son about with him. Tom knew a good deal of the mysteries of stock-farming already, and was, his father declared, almost as good a judge of an ox as he was himself. A first-rate rider, a good shot, and a keen sportsman, Tom was just the kind of cousin Guy had hoped for. The two, who had many points in common, quickly understood one another, and struck up a strong friendship.

Guy was shown everything-the trellised vine, leading from the front door to the gate; the fruit orchard at the side of the house, in which grew peaches, apricots, nectarines, quinces, apples, and pears; the orange trees down by the "lands," where the arable crops, oats and mealies, were grown; the stables and compounds; the cattle and goat kraals; and the ostrich camp, a vast enclosure, where stalked a number of these great birds. He was shown the deep-bore well and windmill pump, which supplied the station with water; the big dam, which looked like a lake, with its fringe of willow and blue gums; and many other things pertaining to the headquarters of a large South African cattle ranch. Altogether, what with the morning drive, the meeting with his new cousins, and the long afternoon of sightseeing, Guy was not sorry for bed at ten o'clock. His head had not been two minutes on the snow-white pillow, scented like the rest of the spotless bed linen with some fragrant veldt herb, before he was sound asleep.

Chapter III.
UP-COUNTRY LIFE

For some weeks Mr. Blakeney allowed Guy to have what may be called a good time. He was anxious that the lad should not be thrust too soon into hard collar-work. There is a good deal of steady routine labour, even upon an up-country farm in South Africa, if the farmer is up-to-date and business-like, and means to take his occupation seriously. There are books to be kept; long and hard days to be spent in the saddle; heavy fencing operations, which need care, thought, and application; journeys to various market centres with troops of fat stock; and a host of other details, not all of which are exactly what may be regarded as pure pleasure or light work. Too many young Englishmen, it is to be feared, look upon stock-farming and cattle-ranching as pleasant out-of-door occupations, entailing merely an ornamental kind of existence. They picture to themselves, before going out to South Africa, a shirt-sleeve and broad-brimmed hat kind of life, in which the stock-farmer has merely to have a good time, while his flocks and herds increase about him. This sort of settler quickly becomes disillusioned, and, having wasted a thousand or two of good money-probably his father's-returns sadly to urban life again, vowing that no one can make money by stock-farming in South Africa.

But there are plenty of hard-working and successful pastoral farmers in many parts of South Africa who can testify to the excellent result of application and attention to details, united with care, foresight, energy, and experience.

For a long month Mr. Blakeney or his son Tom, sometimes both of them, rode far and wide with Guy Hardcastle over the twenty-four thousand odd acres comprised in Bamborough Farm. They explored boundaries, pointed out to Guy the various beacons marking off their limits, inspected cattle, and assisted at the sinking of a well in a distant part of the estate. This well, and the erection of a windmill pump, were needed for the supply of water to the cattle in what had been so waterless a portion of the ranch that it had been hitherto practically unavailable, excellent as was the grass veldt. A good-sized basin was formed in a piece of limestone formation, where once had existed an ancient native well, now long since dry; and here, when the operations were completed, the cattle were able to slake their thirst in a cool, crystal-clear pool, which at once sent up the value of the six thousand acres on this part of the run by two hundred per cent.

They had various bird-shooting excursions, riding out with a couple of pointers, and, so soon as the dogs stood to game, dismounting from their ponies and walking into their shots. In this way they made some pretty bags of Coqui and red-wing francolin, koorhaan, and guinea-fowl. One or two adventures befell Guy at this period. One day they had sallied out to hunt a troop of hartebeest, which ran on a distant part of

the farm. After finding the troop in some prettily-timbered country, well covered with giraffe-acacia, the three had become separated, Guy galloping mile after mile in pursuit of a good bull which he had wounded. The hartebeest, turning out of the troop and quitting the wooded glades in which the herd had been discovered, took away over the open plains. Guy was well mounted, and for a long seven miles pushed after the big red-brown antelope, which swept away in front of him with a free, machine-like action that, despite its wound-a bullet through the middle of the body-showed no symptom of tiring. At length the hartebeest climbed the ridge of a wave in the grass plain, and disappeared. Guy's pony, good and willing as he was, was now tiring visibly. The lad doubted whether he could gallop much farther-the pace had been too great-and the game looked like getting clean away. It was too annoying. They reached the top of the ridge, and looked over. Nothing living was to be seen; the plain was untenanted. Apparently the antelope had vanished into thin air. But Guy's keen eye noted, half a mile or so to the right, a widish patch of vaal bush. Towards this he now rode. He approached within thirty yards, and dismounted. Just as he did so, the wounded antelope rose slowly to its feet from within the shelter of the bush, and essayed to canter off. Too late! The gallant beast had made its last effort and taken its final gallop. Guy's rifle went up, and as the antelope slowly moved away, another bullet from the Mannlicher pierced its heart. It tumbled suddenly to the veldt, and after a brief kick or two lay dead.

Guy now set to work to skin his prize and take off the head. It was a fine bull, carrying excellent horns, and his pride and satisfaction at having thus secured his first big game trophy were very great. By the time he had completed his operations, and slung the skin and a quantity of venison behind the saddle, the hot afternoon was wearing away. Carrying the hartebeest's head in front of him, resting on the pommel of the saddle, Guy now rode back for the woodland. It was a long eight miles, and his nag was by no means fresh after his tremendous exertions. They reached the acacia groves at last. By this time there remained an hour to sunset. Through these endless groves and glades, all much resembling one another, the young Englishman now attempted to thread his way, with the result that, by the time the sun sank, he found himself completely lost. Just at this moment there came from far to the eastward the faint report of a gun, then another. Guy rode that way, but in half an hour the light had clean vanished, and it became a matter of difficulty to manoeuvre a path through the gloom of evening amid this trackless forest. Night fell; there was no moon; and although the stars glittered brilliantly above, it became apparent to Guy that he was benighted. He heard no more shots.

After wandering on, leading his now dog-tired pony, the lad came to the conclusion that he had better camp for the night. He had, luckily, in the hunting pouch at his belt, a box of matches and a compass, two things which his uncle had warned him always to carry on expeditions of this sort. He knew that there

was no water within many miles of where he stood, and that it was useless to think of attempting to find any. He had, unluckily, finished the last remnant of lime juice and water that remained in his water-bottle; bitterly did he now regret the fact. He was terribly thirsty after hunting all day under a burning sun. He felt that at this moment he would gladly have given half a crown, nay, half a sovereign, for a quart of clear water. It was useless to think about it, however, and, philosophically enough, Guy set to work to prepare for the night. First he cut a quantity of grass and placed it before his pony, which by this time he had off-saddled and tied to a bush. On the lee side of this bush he himself meant to sleep, and for this purpose cut more grass and made a rough bed. Then clearing a space-for he had no wish to start a veldt fire-he cut and gathered sticks and odd timber. He had camped by a dead acacia tree, destroyed by white ants, and soon had before him a cheerful blaze. Now cutting some collops of venison, he cooked them in the hot embers, and, with a biscuit that remained over from his lunch, made out a respectable meal. It was hard work eating without water, and with a thirst such as he now possessed; but he managed to swallow some food, and felt a trifle better. The air grew chill, and he now unfastened his coat from his saddle and put it on; then, piling up more wood on the fire, and making a pillow of the inner part of his saddle, he fell asleep. He knew that here, in this waterless and semi-desert part of the veldt, few wild beasts-leopards, cheetahs, or hyænas-would be wandering about; and besides, he was too tired to trouble much if any there were.

At dawn he awoke, cold and stiff; the fire was out; his pony was munching the remains of the grass that lay near him. Guy rose, somewhat refreshed, but with a terribly dry mouth and tongue. Saddling up, he now prepared to seek his way home. By the position of the sun and the aid of his compass, he could now steer some sort of way through this perplexing forest, and he steadily pushed on. Two hours later, having cleared the timber country and emerged once more upon the open plains, he came upon the spoor of horses, which convinced him that he was going in the right direction. After another hour of cantering and walking, he struck a wagon track, and knew that he could now find his way to the homestead. Very shortly he heard the reports of two guns, then a third. He guessed that these were fired by his uncle or cousin, now no doubt in search of him. Cantering that way, he soon caught sight of three mounted men, and in five minutes was shaking hands with his relatives. They had with them a native servant, and were riding out to look for him.

"My word, Guy," said his uncle heartily, "I am glad to have come across you so soon. This is a dickens of a country to get lost in-the veldt is so waterless, except during the rains; and I was getting seriously anxious about you. We wandered about firing shots yesterday afternoon, and then made for home to bring out more water, and hunt you up to-day, in case you had completely lost yourself. Didn't you hear our shots yesterday?"

"Yes," answered Guy, "I heard two just before sundown last evening; but they were far away to the east, and I couldn't make

anything of them, though I wandered that way after dark. Then I camped, made a fire, and slept, and here I am."

"Excellent, my boy," said his uncle; "but you must be terribly dry. Here, April," turning to the native; "unfasten that water-bottle and give Baas Guy a drink. Drink up, lad; it's cold tea, and will do you good."

Guy drank and drank, and presently returned the bottle.

"Never tasted anything so good in my life," he said, wiping his lips. "It's nectar. I begin to understand what thirst really is. In England we can have no idea of it, in a country where you can't go a mile without coming on water of some kind or other."

"You're quite right," added Mr. Blakeney. "They don't half appreciate the blessings of life at home. You want to rough it out here a bit to understand what English comfort and English luxury really mean. Why, we had a man staying with us a year back, looking at stock, who got lost in the veldt out here for three days, two of which he passed without a drop of water. Ultimately we tracked him to a native kraal on the Molopo, thirty miles away. In this kind of country-in fact all through Bechuanaland, on the Kalahari side-you've got to watch it, or you may easily get lost, and perhaps die of thirst and starvation. Now, let's be off home for breakfast. We have an hour and a half's ride still before us."

Meanwhile, Tom Blakeney had been examining his cousin's hunting trophy. "By Jove, Guy," he exclaimed, "you've got a first-rate head! That's a real good old bull hartebeest; you seldom see finer horns."

"Yes, Tom," rejoined his cousin, "I thought it was a good head; and if I had had to go without water another twenty-four hours, I should have brought it back with me. It's my first hunting trophy, and I shall always be proud of it."

"You'll do, Guy!" exclaimed his uncle, as they rode homewards. "I like to see a fellow keen; and I'm sure you will shoot many a head of big game before you've finished. Some day we'll go into the real hunting veldt, where you can prove your mettle against more formidable beasts."

A week or two later, Tom and Guy were shooting redwing partridges and koorhaan in a pretty piece of country some miles from the homestead. They had quitted the banks of a periodical stream, where they had bagged half a dozen brace of redwings and a steinbuck, and were now in search of black and white koorhaan and Coqui partridges on a wide piece of grassy plain which ran up to a distant line of kopjes. Juno, the pointer, stood; and Tom, slipping quietly from his saddle, walked cautiously forward, his gun at the ready. Still the staunch dog stood, pointing stiffly at something in front of her. Tom advanced yet farther, and then, without a cry and very noiselessly, there rose from the long grass a single bird, with long greenish legs and a big head. It was an easy shot, and Tom fired and brought it down.

"A dikkop," he cried, as he ran forward and picked up the bird. Guy came up and inspected the game, which was of a species he had not yet seen in Bechuanaland.

"Why, it's the same as our Norfolk plover, or thick-knee," he

said. "Father shot one years ago in Suffolk, and had it stuffed. I can tell it by its big staring eyes."

"Yes, it's nearly the same bird," rejoined his cousin. "I believe there's some little difference in the species, here we call it by the Dutch name dikkop, or thickhead. They're rattling good eating, and we'll stick it in the bag."

Smoothing the bird's feathers, and placing it in the wallet slung behind his saddle, they went on.

In another half hour, during which time they got no shot, Juno, the pointer, became curiously restless. She seemed to neglect the sport in front of her, and turned perpetually to sniff the breeze which blew from their left flank. Suddenly, after quartering the ground in that direction, she stopped and barked furiously.

"What's the old girl up to?" ejaculated Tom. "I'll go and see."

As he turned his horse that way, the pointer, hitherto standing with hackles up, manifestly in a state of intense anger, suddenly turned and fled, her tail between her legs. Guy Hardcastle, curious to know what had so alarmed the dog, walked his nag that way. The two cousins rode on together for thirty yards, and then, with a curious hissing sound, there rose, ten paces in front of them, the head and neck of an enormous serpent. The reptile reared itself so suddenly, and its aspect was so menacing, that Guy's pony shied violently and swerved off, nearly unseating its rider as it did so.

"Look out, Guy!" cried his cousin. "It's a python. Canter away a bit and slip in louper cartridges [buck shot], and then we'll have

a go at the brute. He's been following us." They cantered away forty or fifty yards, changing their cartridges as they did so, and then returned to the charge.

Meanwhile the python, which had undoubtedly been stalking them, had thought better of it, and, seeing more formidable quarry than it had bargained for, was slipping away. The lads galloped to the spot where they had last seen it; and Tom, pointing to a movement in the long grass in front of them, exclaimed excitedly, "There it goes; come on!"

Guy, who was not used to snakes, didn't half like the idea of stalking such a monster; but as his cousin galloped on, he touched his pony with the spur and rode after him. Nearer and nearer they drew towards the rustling grass. Suddenly the movement ceased, and the huge, evil-looking head rose before them. The serpent was undeniably angry, and a big python in a rage is a formidable opponent.

"Shoot," whispered Tom in a steady voice.

Guy needed not incitement. Already his gun was up; they fired together, and as the double report rattled out, the great serpent, stricken in the head and neck, fell writhing into the pale grass. One of the two shots had luckily broken its backbone a foot or so below the head; but the huge serpent was by no means disabled, and now, half impotent though it was, it struggled furiously to reach its adversaries. Beating and flapping the earth in its agony and rage, it writhed itself towards the two horsemen, who now separated and gave it another shot apiece. Then, recharging their

guns, they returned, and finished the wounded monster with a couple more charges.

Having ascertained that the snake was really dead, they dismounted and approached it; then, stretching out the reptile to its full length, Tom took a tape measure from his pocket and ran over its dimensions.

"Eighteen feet," he remarked, rising from his task. "The biggest python killed in these parts!"

"Have you many of these brutes about the place?" asked Guy, turning over the monster with his foot, and comparing the greenish white of its underparts with the brilliant markings of its upper colouring.

"No, not many," answered Tom. "They're shy, secretive beggars, and one very seldom, indeed, comes across them. I've not heard of one for two or three years."

"Thank goodness for that," rejoined Guy. "I must say, if I thought there were many of these creatures in the neighbourhood, I should come bird-shooting precious seldom, especially on foot. Surely they are dangerous? They're not poisonous, I suppose?"

"No, they're not poisonous, luckily," returned Tom. "But they can constrict. Whether they can kill a man I don't know. I shouldn't like to try the experiment. Father says they can't. Still, they can try; and if they were big enough-like this one, for example-they might give you a very unpleasant time of it. They certainly do kill small buck occasionally. Three years ago

a python-rock snakes, the colonists call them-which father had shot was found to contain the bones of a duyker in its stomach; and our native boys killed another, with their knobkerries, which had killed and eaten a steinbuck just before, and was completely gorged and stupid after its meal."

They finished their shoot across the flat, adding three brace of koorhaan and Coqui partridges to their bag, and then came back to the dead python. Fastening this to the end of a piece of cord which Tom carried with him, they trailed the serpent behind them and struck for home. Arrived at Bamborough towards four o'clock, they stretched out the great serpent in the front garden, and invited all and sundry to come and view their conquest. It was agreed that so large a python had never before been seen in that part of the country.

"Yes," said Mr. Blakeney, as he watched Tom and Guy divesting the creature of its beautiful skin, "it's a big snake. Three years ago I got quite a fright with one of these reptiles. I was shooting alone and on foot about two miles from here. Juno was with me, and she seemed very uneasy, just as she was with you to-day. Suddenly, as I turned round-I don't know what made me do it-I saw, sticking out above the grass not ten yards behind me, a python. Just for one second I was in a real fright, I promise you-the thing was so sudden. However, the brute looked very nasty, and I put up my gun and fired at once, smashing its head to pieces. It struggled a bit, and another shot finished it. Now, that snake had followed me right across the flat from the river bed-

where, I imagine, it had its holt or hiding-place in some bush or among the rocks-for a distance of more than a mile. It was rather uncanny, wasn't it?"

"Very uncanny, indeed," answered Guy. "I don't like the brutes at all. Do you think they would go for one?"

"No; on the whole, I don't think they would," said Mr. Blakeney. "And if they did, although they might frighten you and even hurt you, I don't think they could kill a man. They could kill a child, as they do undoubtedly kill a young calf sometimes; and for that reason I'm not over fond of them-in fact, I destroy them whenever I come across them, if I can. They're slippery brutes, however, and once let them get near rocks or bush and you'll never see them again."

"The natives about here, father, don't like them?" queried Tom, as he finished his part of the task, and together he and Guy rolled the stripped body of the serpent from its skin, which they had now completely flayed away from the flesh.

"No, the Bechuanas don't like them," rejoined Mr. Blakeney. "At the same time they don't care about molesting them. In Zululand the natives will never touch them. They have an idea that the souls of their ancestors return to the bodies of these serpents, and will even allow them to live close to their huts. For my part, I don't like the proximity of such neighbours."

Having carefully scraped every fragment of fat or flesh from the skin, the two lads rubbed in arsenical soap, and pegged it out on the shady side of the wall of an outhouse, where in a day or

two the cure was complete.

In a few more weeks Guy Hardcastle had acquired a very fair knowledge of the far-spreading pastures of Bamborough Farm. He began to pick up, too, some knowledge of stock and stock-farming, for he was a quick lad, who always had his wits about him, and was anxious to gain any sort of information that might be useful to him. He had seen mealies and oats reaped, and assisted in other operations. He had had a very good time, for, mingled with the preliminaries of a pastoral farmer's life, to which his uncle had introduced him, he had had a fair amount of shooting, several pleasant excursions with his cousins to neighbouring farms, and a trip to Mafeking to bring home stores. At the end of January he accompanied his uncle to Johannesburg with a herd of fat cattle, which were disposed of for excellent prices on their arrival there.

On this expedition, although they were assisted by native servants, they had to experience some of the roughs and tumbles of veldt life. They lived for the most part in the saddle, sleeping at night in a light mule wagon which accompanied them. The weather was broken and unsettled; the rains, which began in December, still fell heavily at intervals, and they were often drenched to the skin. Even their wagon tent by no means sufficed to protect them from the tropical downpours that periodically fell from the lowering heavens. Nevertheless, to the secret satisfaction of Mr. Blakeney, Guy bore all the discomforts that overtook them with the most cheerful spirit, and arrived at

Johannesburg in excellent heart and fettle. He had proved himself a very useful auxiliary, and his uncle was more than well pleased with his behaviour. The return from the gold city was made with much less discomfort, and, unencumbered with a big herd of cattle, they reached home within a fortnight.

One evening, a short time after their return, Mr. Blakeney called Guy into his own room, the "den," as he called it, in which he did most of the office work connected with the farm, and kept his papers, books, and accounts, as well as his guns, rifles, and ammunition. Guy was just then engaged in a game of chess with his aunt, who was a skilful player, and was teaching him something of the rudiments of the art.

"Well, aunt," he said, as he rose with a cheery laugh, "I'm defeated again, I see. You have mate in another move, haven't you?"

"I'm afraid it is so, Guy," replied Mrs. Blakeney. "Never mind; you are getting along very well. This has been quite a good fight, and in another six months you will be crowing over me, I expect."

Guy walked quickly to his uncle's room, where an oil lamp shed a bright glow over everything. Mr. Blakeney was a man of methodical habits. His books and papers were always in their right places; his guns gleamed brightly on their racks; everything was in apple-pie order.

"Sit down, Guy," said his uncle, pointing to the chair near him; "I want to have a bit of a talk with you. First of all, I want to know something about your views of cattle-farming and South African

farming life generally. Is it the kind of life you think will suit you, and can you make up your mind to settle down to it? You have now had a three months' apprenticeship, and have probably formed your own opinions."

"Well, Uncle Charles," replied Guy, "my answer is a very short one. I like the life immensely, and mean to stick to it. I can think of nothing that will suit me half so well as to settle down steadily to the same kind of existence that you lead here. I should like it above all things, and I have thought the whole matter very carefully over."

"Remember, Guy, my boy," said his uncle kindly, "that hitherto, except for the journey to Johannesburg, which wasn't a very pleasant one, although from a financial point of view it answered excellently, you have seen rather the bright side of things out here. This place, although I say it who perhaps shouldn't, is rather a cut above the average. We have put capital into the thing, my cousin and I-I mean, of course, George Forster, who farms the adjoining land, and is my partner. We do the thing well, and our homesteads are exceptionally good. We have, as you see, some of the refinements as well as the comforts of civilization about us. And hitherto we have had good seasons and great luck. But you have to remember that there come times of drought; various diseases attack stock, locusts destroy the veldt, and the farmer's losses are often very heavy indeed. They say rinderpest is on its way south, and will in time reach us even here. It has got as far as Nyasaland, and will probably work its way

right through the continent to the very shores of Cape Colony. You must look at all these things before you decide."

"Well, uncle," repeated Guy, "I can only say that I have honestly tried to look at the thing all round. I know-and many thanks to you all for it-that you have shown me the best and brightest side of everything, and that I can't always expect to live in the lap of luxury, as I do here. Please take my word for it. I want to go in for this kind of life. I mean to stick to it seriously and learn the business, and try and make something out of it; and I do hope you will do what you once said you might be inclined to do-that is, teach me the business, and let me in time get hold of some land near you. I have quite made up my mind, and that's my decision."

"Well, Guy," said his uncle, with a pleased look on his kindly, expressive face, "I'm very glad to hear this. I like you, my boy. I believe you will stick to your business, and not look at it merely as a hobby or a plaything; and I can only say, for my part, that I will do all in my power to help you on. For your father's sake, as well as your own, I shall do this; and I hope in a few years, when you've got experience, you will do very well for yourself. Meanwhile, I've lately had my eye on two farms, hitherto unoccupied, which touch our north-west boundary. They are called Hartebeestfontein and Bushman's Kraal. I can get them cheap. They are the usual six thousand acre farms, and I can buy them from Government for £600 the pair. I shall write to my agent at Vryburg to-morrow to secure these farms, which I shall

henceforth take to and stock. I shall hold these at your disposal, either one or both of them; and in two or three years' time, if you like to try and make a start on your own hook, why, we'll put up a decent house for you, open up the water supply-I know on Hartebeestfontein there is a spring, and I believe there are some likely *aars* [veins] in the limestone, where more water is pretty certain to be found-and stock the place, so that you can make a fair beginning. But we must go slow for a time, and meanwhile you've got to learn your business. Still, I am bound to say that I believe and hope you'll do very well. You are steady, or I am very much mistaken; you have brains; and I know, I can see, that, like your dear father, you will always go straight, which in this life is a good deal more than half the battle."

Chapter IV.
THE GOLD SPOOR

"There is another matter I want to speak to you about, Guy," continued Mr. Blakeney, "which has been perplexing me a good deal. It is this: When your father wrote me the first of the two last letters he sent me before his death, he sent also a short statement, sealed in a packet and marked 'Important.' This statement concerns a very rich discovery of gold in a far-away part of the interior of South-west Africa, somewhere on the border of the Portuguese territory of Benguela. I have worried over this problem for many weeks past, and the conclusion I have come to is that I ought to tell you about the whole business. The shortest and best plan is, I think, to show you your father's letter. Here it is; I'll read it to you: -

"'ABAQUESSA, GOLD COAST,

***March* 19, 1896**

"'MY DEAR CHARLIE, – You will see from the letter I have already written you that I am in a very precarious state of health, and that I doubt greatly if I shall get over these repeated attacks

of fever. In case anything happens to me, I must unburden my mind on one other matter, which seems to me, though it may not to you, very important. A year ago, as you know, I was making some mineral explorations for copper in the mountains behind Mossamedes, Portuguese West Africa. There was little copper to be found worth speaking of, and this business came to an end. One day towards the finish of this work, a Bushman in my service, named Poeskop, came to me and said he thought he could show me something better than copper; that he had once found gold, and that he would show me the place where he had found it. Poeskop was a Bushman from the country north-east of Ovampoland, in German territory. He had worked for Germans and others, and had afterwards drifted into the service of one of the Trek Boers who came to the Mossamedes country fifteen or sixteen years before. He had been brutally treated by this Boer, and, running away from him, came to me. I treated him kindly, and he became exceedingly attached to me, and would do anything for me. He speaks Boer Dutch and one or two native languages of his own country, besides a smattering of German. Well, I asked Poeskop what he meant, and where was the gold he spoke of. He took from the bottom of a dirty old pouch he always wore a piece of skin sewn up with sinew. Cutting this open, he took out four small nuggets of gold, manifestly water-worn. He said that where they came from there were plenty more-plenty. He had come across the place years before as a lad, and he had discovered what gold was, and its value, when he was working for

some German prospectors in Damaraland. He knew now also the worth of gold money in English, and German, and Portuguese. I asked him how long it would take us to reach the place. He said more than a month. I was then under contract for this work at the Gold Coast, and it was impossible to throw it up, or to spare the time-about three months in all, reckoning the return journey to Mossamedes. I told the man I would return, if possible, the following year (1897), or, if not that year, in 1898, in the month of June, which is their healthy season, and go with him to the place. Meanwhile, would he promise not to say a word to any other person? Poeskop replied that he cared for no other white man but me; that he would wait till I came, and would meet me in Mossamedes in June the next year (1897), and the year after, and the year after that; and that each year he would wait for me a month. "But," I said, "supposing I can't come, and wish to send some one else in my place? I may be ill, or dead, or anything may have happened to me." "Well, my baas," replied Poeskop, his little drooping eyes twinkling in the oddest kind of way, "if you can't come, and send any one in your place, let him show me that funny *steenje* which you wear on your watch-chain, and I shall know he is your man, and will do what he asks me." The *steenje*, I must tell you, was nothing else than a piece of New Zealand jade, carved rather curiously in the shape of a fish. Well, there's the end of my yarn. I am dead tired, and feeling very ill. The ague is coming on again, as you can see by my handwriting."

"Here," interjected Mr. Blakeney, "as you can see, Guy,

your poor father's writing has become very shaky. But he has underscored the remaining lines of his letter, and they run thus: -

"'My dear Charlie, *I consider this discovery is very important. Poeskop, who was in my service five months, is a most shrewd and reliable little chap. I know he is not lying. I know he has found a place very rich in gold. Of this I am absolutely confident. If I'm right, there is a fortune for all of us. If I get through this bout of fever I shall ask you to give up your ranching for six months, and come and join me at Mossamedes in June. If I go under-and something tells me I shall-I beg you to go on my behalf. Take with you a good and reliable mining engineer; and if Guy is with you, take him. If you cannot go this year, go next.* I can't finish … what I meant to say. This fever is too much for me. *You and Guy are to go shares if the gold is right.* – From yours ever,

"'J. S. HARDCASTLE.'

"Well now, Guy," added his uncle, "there's the yarn. Look over the letter yourself."

Guy read the letter again, with a serious face, from beginning to end.

"Poor pater!" he said, as he concluded, the tears standing in his eyes; "he was ill indeed when he wrote and underscored these last lines. Oh, that he could have been with us now!"

"Would that he could have been, Guy!" said his uncle feelingly; "would that he could! Having read that letter, you will understand something of my anxiety. If your father's surmises are correct, there is a fortune for us all. And yet any ordinary

business man would say the whole thing is a mere wild-goose chase, a will-of-the-wisp. I am bothered awfully; I hardly know what to say, what to do."

Guy Hardcastle sprang to his feet.

"Uncle Charles!" he exclaimed, "I'm certain this is no wild-goose chase! My father had a great knowledge of men and things, especially where natives and mining were concerned. He wasn't a mad enthusiast; in fact, I always looked upon him as a very long-headed and cautious man. I'm only a boy; but that was my impression. Let us go. I'm certain that our search will be a success!"

"Well, Guy," rejoined Mr. Blakeney, smiling at the lad's enthusiasm, "I half believe you are right. Your father was no hunter of wild geese; he was, as you thought him, a man of good judgment and much knowledge. Yet there are many difficulties to be surmounted. I don't like leaving this place just now. Still, there's George Forster to look after matters in my absence-as he did two years ago, when I was in England.

"I might do this," he went on, speaking as if to himself. "Some years ago I trekked across the Kalahari, by way of Lake Ngami, to Damaraland, and traded and brought back a thousand head of cattle. I have sometimes thought of repeating the trip; but it's a tough business, and a long and anxious one. If I go with you, we might kill two birds with one stone: go round by sea, and so save much time; and after we have had a hunt for the treasure, pick up a lot of cattle and bring them overland. Meanwhile I'll have a

talk with your aunt, and hear what she thinks about it all."

Mrs. Blakeney was a great believer in her brother; and her vote went for the expedition, little as she liked the prospect of parting from her husband for five or six months. Finally Mr. Blakeney's mind was made up: he determined to go, at all events, as far as Mossamedes. If Poeskop were found, well and good: they would go on with the search. If he were not found, they would go south, buy cattle in Damaraland and Ovampoland, and take them across to Bechuanaland by the Trek Boer route, *viâ* Lake Ngami. No sooner was the expedition settled upon than Guy begged his uncle to let Tom accompany them. This Mr. Blakeney refused; Tom, he said, must remain at home to look after his mother and sisters. But, as the lads pointed out, Mr. Blakeney's partner and cousin, George Forster, was coming across to live at Bamborough and take up the management of affairs during his absence. For weeks the lads moved heaven and earth to accomplish their purpose. They at length won over Mrs. Blakeney; and after she had joined for a few days in the siege, Mr. Blakeney gave way. It was settled that Tom was to go, and the two cousins were overjoyed. After much consideration, Mr. Blakeney decided not to take a mining engineer, as suggested by his brother-in-law. He himself had spent two years on the Lydenburg goldfields, in the Eastern Transvaal, in his younger days, and had a fair knowledge of gold and gold formations; he had learned assaying also. On the whole, they all deemed it wiser not to impart the secret to any one out of their own family.

Towards the middle of May the party went down by rail to Cape Town, and thence by sea to Mossamedes. Ostensibly they were on a cattle-trading expedition; even George Forster was not let into the secret of the gold search. It would be too ridiculous if the quest turned out an unsuccessful one, and the gold vanished into thin air. Moreover, Mr. Blakeney deemed it unwise to make any mention of gold at all; the merest whisper of it might get about, and set others upon the alert. They kept the secret, therefore, severely to themselves. In pursuance of his expressed intention of bringing home some cattle, Mr. Blakeney took with him as wagon-drivers and herds four of his most reliable natives. These were-Jan Kokerboom, a Koranna; Seleti and Mangwalaan, two Bechuanas of the Barolong clan; and September, a Zulu. They were all good herdsmen and horse-masters, fair shots, and, barring various idiosyncrasies and prejudices peculiar to their tribes, steady and reliable men. Jan Kokerboom was a capital cook, a generally handy man, a good rider and shot, and a first-class hunter. After a fairly prosperous voyage of a week, during the early part of which the natives suffered a good deal from sea-sickness, the ship dropped anchor in Little Fish Bay, off Mossamedes, and the party landed. Their hunting ponies, four in all, which they had brought with them from Bamborough, were safely got ashore.

Mossamedes is, compared with other Portuguese towns on the African coast, rather a pleasant little place. It is built of white stone, and has a picturesque esplanade, lined with palm trees,

running along the frontage to the bay. The country surrounding is not very inviting, that to the east and south being, like the littoral of Damaraland and Namaqualand, almost completely desert.

Having passed their baggage at the Custom House with somewhat greater ease than they expected-thanks mainly to a judicious use by Mr. Blakeney of palm oil-they went up the town, and found fairly comfortable quarters at the principal hotel. Here they remained for a week without being able to find any trace of the native known as Poeskop. At the hotel, the proprietor remembered Mr. Hardcastle, who had stayed with him. He remembered also his Bushman servant Poeskop, but neither he nor any of his people had seen him lately in the town. While they were thus waiting, Mr. Blakeney was by no means idle. He spoke with various Trek Boers who were in the place; bought an excellent tent-wagon for £80; four fairly good horses, wiry, but in low condition-a useful addition to their stud; and a span of serviceable oxen. These would in any case be necessary to them, even if Poeskop failed to put in an appearance. The native servants were then dispatched to the commonage outside the town, where a camp was formed, and the horses and cattle were turned out for grazing. The wagon was thoroughly cleaned out, repaired, and painted, and various cooking utensils necessary for the trek were purchased.

On the evening of the seventh day of their stay in Mossamedes the little party of English were sitting, half an hour before dinner, near the landing-place. Mr. Blakeney spent much time there;

for he had an idea that if the Bushman, Poeskop, came to Mossamedes at all, he would make his way to the shore, and be on the lookout for his old master.

"Pater," said Tom, kicking his heels against the low wall on which he sat, "I begin to think the man Poeskop is a solar myth, and I am revolving in my mind a theory by which he can be explained away."

The lad had a roguish smile on his face, at which his father in turn could not help laughing.

"Well, fire away!" replied Mr. Blakeney. "What's your theory?"

"Well, I'll shortly explain," went on Tom. "I consider you and Guy have brought me out here under false pretences. The whole thing is a Barney. I've been thinking it all out for days past. Poeskop is clearly a non-existent person; and here is my theory of his non-existence!"

At this instant, from behind a great pile of stores which lay stacked on the landing-place, there appeared, just in front of them, the short figure of a native. He was a queer, dwarfish-looking little man, with high cheek-bones, a narrow chin, and yellowish skin. His eyes slanted upwards like a Chinaman's; curious, dark, bloodshot eyes they were, with a singular droop of the lids and innumerable wrinkles at the corners. This odd figure was dressed in an old store suit of faded moleskin, a ragged shirt, and a very battered, broad-brimmed hat. A pair of velschoens covered the man's feet. Before Tom, who stared open-mouthed

at the apparition, could proceed with his theory, the little man's sharp eyes had run rapidly over the group before him. He looked, as it were expectantly, into the countenance of each. His eyes lingered longest on the face of Guy, and then fell instantly to the middle of the boy's waist. Stretching out his right forefinger, he pointed, with a gesture of strange energy and earnestness, at the watch-chain which Guy wore: it was his father's, and the green jade ornament depended from it.

Mr. Blakeney had watched the man keenly.

"Poeskop?" he said quietly.

"Ja; Poeskop," returned the native instantly, looking furtively about him. "Vaar is de baas-Baas Hartcassel?"

Mr. Blakeney could not refrain from his little triumph over Tom, who sat utterly confounded.

"Tom, my boy!" he said, with a hearty laugh, "your solar myth is instantly exploded. Here is the essential man, Poeskop himself!"

And indeed it was Poeskop. Speaking in Dutch, Mr. Blakeney explained to the strange little figure before them what had happened. The Bushman followed the story closely, nodding his head, and throwing in a "Ja, ja!" now and again, as it were rounding off the various points. When Mr. Blakeney ceased, he spoke.

"Ja," he said, "I am Poeskop. I came here to meet my Baas Hartcassel, and I am sad because of the news I hear. Never mind; if I cannot be his 'boy' longer, I will be his son's 'boy.' And I will

tell you all I know, and take you to the place where-" [here he glanced suspiciously round him, with eyes that searched keenly beneath their droop] " – where my baas wanted me to take him. I see that the young baas is truly the son of my old baas: he has the same blue eyes, and the same look, and the same coloured hair, and though he is young he walks just as walked his father. I saw him yesterday, and watched him; and again to-day I watched him; and now I have seen the *steenje*-the little stone of the fish-and I am sure. Well, I am glad indeed. I will be the young baas's 'boy,' and wait upon him and hunt for him, as I did for his father. Is it not so?" he asked, looking inquiringly first at Mr. Blakeney, then at Guy.

"Yes," said Guy quickly, his colour heightened with the interest and excitement of the discovery; "it is so. You shall be my 'boy,' and I will be your baas, and try to be a good baas to you, as my father was. What wages did he give you?"

"He gave me one pound a month and my *skorf* [food], baas," replied Poeskop, "and sometimes some old clothes when I wanted them."

"Well, I'll do the same," returned Guy cheerfully; "and I am sure we shall be good friends."

Poeskop smiled a huge smile at this speech, showing a set of splendid teeth, which for the moment strongly illuminated his quaint and decidedly ugly visage.

"That is very good, my young baas," he said, his face still beaming with pleasure; "and I shall show you what I promised to

show to your father" – he glanced round again, as if fearing to be overheard-"the Gold Kloof. It is there!" He stretched a forefinger into the air, pointing north-eastward. "And you will find plenty gold, enough for you all; and you will make Poeskop rich too, and buy him cattle, and set him up as a farmer."

It was now arranged that the Bushman should at once join the outfit. They walked with him to the wagon outside the town, and introduced him to the other servants. Had he a gun? asked Mr. Blakeney. Yes; he had a gun, concealed not far away. He would get it that night, and put it in the wagon. It was a Martini carbine, given to him by Baas Hardcastle, and in good condition; but he wanted ammunition. This Mr. Blakeney promised to procure for him; and they left the little man at his supper as happy as a king.

Next morning Poeskop turned up at the hotel in good time, as Mr. Blakeney had told him to do. It was after breakfast; and they were talking in front of the place, the three Englishmen asking the little Bushman all sorts of questions as to their route, the kind of country they would pass through, the prospects of game (which Poeskop told them were first-rate), and so forth.

"Poeskop," presently queried Mr. Blakeney, "how long will it take us, trekking steadily and with good oxen (which I have got), to reach the kloof?"

"About six weeks, baas," replied the Bushman. "It is far, and the way is hard."

"I had thought of getting another wagon," continued Mr. Blakeney. "It will be rather a squeeze for myself and the two

young masters here to get into one at night. What say you, Poeskop? Can we manage with two easily?"

"Baas," replied the Bushman, "I would not take two wagons, if you can help it. It is a hard trek, and we have to cross a piece of *doorst-land* [thirst-land], which takes more than a week to get through: two days' and two nights' trek, then water, but not much; then two days and a night without water; then a water-pit; and then three days' and three nights' thirst. It will be hard to get across this with one wagon; much harder with two. If I were the baas, I would take the one wagon only and some spare oxen. We may lose some beasts on the trek from lions, or thirst, or hard work; and it will be safer."

"I'm glad you told me of this, Poeskop," said Mr. Blakeney. "You are quite right; we will take one wagon only. I can buy a small tent in the town; that will do for the young baases to sleep in, and I can have my *kartel* [bed-frame] to myself in the wagon. In the daytime the tent can be lashed along the buck-rail."

They discussed many other points connected with the trek, concerning all of which the little Bushman gave them copious information. Suddenly, as he glanced down the sandy street, his countenance changed; he trembled; fear unmistakably seized him.

"Baas," he said, in a hoarse voice, "there comes Karl Engelbrecht; I am afraid!"

"Who is Karl Engelbrecht?" asked Guy; "and why are you afraid?"

"He is the Trek Boer in whose service I used to be," returned the Bushman. "He beat me often with his sjambok, and treated me cruelly; and so I ran away. But I fear him still. He is a bad man-*schelm*!"

"You need have no fear, Poeskop," said Mr. Blakeney; "I will look after you. Put on a bold face, and stick to me; I'll see that your friend Engelbrecht plays no tricks upon you. Remember that you are in my service, and that we are in Portuguese and not Boer country."

They watched the two tall figures, on which Poeskop's eyes were fastened, coming up the street. The Bushman whispered that Karl Engelbrecht was the bigger of the two-the man on the right. The Boers-for they were manifestly both Dutchmen-were now close to the hotel. Karl Engelbrecht, of whom Poeskop stood in so much terror, was a typical Boer of Boers-a big, heavy, slouching fellow, six feet in height, powerfully made, very strong, but slack and loose-limbed. He wore the usual Boer clothing-short jacket and loose trousers of moleskin, a flannel shirt, velschoens (field-shoes) of untanned hide, and a big slouch-hat, ornamented with a single short black-and-white ostrich plume. His long hay-coloured hair ran over his ears and partly covered his neck, and he wore a huge untrimmed beard and moustache of the same dull hue. His hard, pale blue eyes were set deep above broad, sunburnt, fleshy cheeks. It was an unpleasant face; something in the lowering brows, the hard, furtive eyes, gave the beholder instantly an unpleasant impression; and about the man's

whole demeanour there was an undefinable yet unmistakable air of menace and brutality. The Dutchman accompanying him was of a much milder and less aggressive type-a big, dark-bearded, slouching fellow, of dull and heavy countenance, with nothing much to differentiate him from scores of his fellows of the Transvaal, Orange Free State, and Cape Colony.

As Karl Engelbrecht strode up to the hotel, his eyes suddenly fell upon Poeskop. He started, frowned evilly, glowered at the three white men standing near, and then, taking a step or two forward, seized the Bushman by the collar of his jacket.

"So, my fine fellow, I have caught you, have I?" he said, in a deep guttural and manifestly angry voice. As he spoke, he cuffed the unfortunate Bushman heavily on the head with his huge hand.

Mr. Blakeney was a strong and determined man, and in no mood to stand by and see his servant knocked about. His blood rose instantly at the insolent aggression of this bully.

"Let the man alone!" he said angrily in Dutch, snatching Poeskop away so suddenly and with such force that he freed him from the Boer's grip. "He is my servant!"

Karl Engelbrecht turned instantly upon the Englishman. His face was inflamed with passion, and he struck a heavy blow with his right fist, which, if it had not been parried, would have caught Mr. Blakeney fair in the face. But the latter had been a good boxer in his young days, and had no difficulty in stopping the hit. He was an active man, hard as nails, and in the prime of life, and he was in no mood to take a blow from any man. He retorted by

a swift left-hander, which crashed into the middle of the Boer's broad, fleshy face like a kick from a horse. The blood instantly gushed from Engelbrecht's nose. With an oath in Dutch the giant rushed upon his assailant, swinging at him some dangerous right-handers; but Mr. Blakeney, although angry enough, was much too good a general to be overcome in this way. He fought very coolly, parried the round-arm blows, and every now and again planted on the Dutchman's face heavy and telling strokes that quickly told their tale. Pausing to get breath, to spit the blood from his mouth, and to wipe his streaming nose with the back of his hand, the Dutchman once more rushed in to the attack. This time he fought desperately, and Mr. Blakeney had some ado to repel the rush. Changing his tactics, he delivered two or three heavy body-blows, under which the Dutchman winced visibly; the third of these took the Boer's wind, and doubled him up. As his head went forward, the Englishman let drive one vicious upper cut which took Engelbrecht on the point of the jaw and stretched him instantly on the sand. The fight was over.

Chapter V.
THE TREK BEGINS

Karl Engelbrecht gathered himself up after a short pause, but there was no further fight left in him. He turned to go.

"All right, my fine Englishman," he said, shaking his fist at his conqueror. "I don't know who you are or what you are, but no one does Karl Engelbrecht an injury without paying for it. I shall be even with you, and that before very long. Meanwhile I shall go straight to the magistrate's office, and get that scoundrel arrested for running away from my service."

As he spoke he pointed to Poeskop, who was smiling all over his yellow face at his former master's discomfiture.

"And I'll follow you to the magistrate's office directly," said Mr. Blakeney, "and have you summoned for assaulting this native."

Accompanied by the two lads, who were overjoyed, if a little awed, at the result of the contest, Mr. Blakeney went into the hotel to wash his hands and get rid of all traces of the encounter. He himself had scarcely suffered at all. He had a lump on his forehead and a red patch on his cheek-bone, and one of his knuckles was badly cut; beyond these slight injuries he has untouched.

"My word, uncle," said Guy, as Mr. Blakeney took his coat

off and poured out some water, "you did punish that ruffian. I had no idea you were such a fighting man. It was splendid!"

"Well, boys," returned Mr. Blakeney, "I don't like fighting, and I have always made it a point to avoid a scuffle if it can possibly be done. But sometimes there comes an occasion when a man must take his own part. This was one of them. I couldn't stand by and see that hulking bully knocking Poeskop about. My idea is that every decent Englishman, or English boy, should be able to defend himself when compelled to, and for that reason I believe in every lad being taught to box. My old boxing lessons stood me in good stead just now. I suppose the Boer was at least a couple of stone heavier than myself; but he knew no more about fighting than a baby, and he paid the penalty."

He soused his face in cold water, washed his hands, and with the two lads and Poeskop went off to the magistrate's office. The upshot of the affair was that Karl Engelbrecht was proved to be entirely in the wrong. It was shown that he had persistently maltreated Poeskop, and that he had seldom if ever paid him his rightful wages. Other natives in the town, who were under Portuguese rule, but who had served with Engelbrecht, could speak to these facts. In the end the Boer was fined for assaulting the Bushman, and ordered to pay him a further sum of money due for unpaid wages. The Dutchman paid the money with a wry face, and it was clear that he was yet more inflamed with hatred against Poeskop and his English supporters than he had been before.

But for the most part the people of Mossamedes, including the governor of the town and other officials, were delighted at the punishment inflicted on the big Boer. He was known and feared as a quarrelsome bully, and now some one had been found to check his blustering career and cut his comb. Mr. Blakeney was advised privately, after these occurrences, to keep his eyes open. Karl Engelbrecht was a man of evil reputation, who would not be likely to stop at trifles in the achievement of revenge, and revenge he was known to have vowed. In the town nothing would be attempted, but in the veldt such a ruffian might very well try to do mischief. However, Mr. Blakeney treated the matter very coolly. He was well able to take care of himself, he said; and having wide experience of the veldt and veldt ways, he felt perfectly competent to set at naught the blusterings of Karl Engelbrecht and his followers. The big Dutchman, having got over the effects of the fight, was having a good time in Mossamedes. For some time past the Portuguese Government had been employing the Trek Boers settled in their territory as mercenaries in their warfare against any tribes that happened to give trouble. The Boers took their payment chiefly in cattle, raided from the defeated tribesfolk; and Engelbrecht, who had been lately leading a commando against some unfortunate natives, had returned with much plunder in oxen and goats. These he had sold for good prices; his pockets were full of money, and he and his freebooting associates were bent on having a high time at the various bars and canteens of the place.

It is perhaps necessary to explain here, in a few words, how it came about that Boers were thus to be found in Portuguese territory, so far away from the homes of the South African Dutch stock settled in the Transvaal. Nearly twenty years before, many families of Boers, disgusted with the anarchy and bad government of the Transvaal Republic, and embittered yet more at the English taking over the country, as they had done in 1877, had quitted the Transvaal and trekked north-westward across the desert in search of a new Promised Land, which they believed to exist somewhere in the far interior. These ignorant and misguided folk found in their long wanderings no land of Canaan, flowing, as they had fondly hoped, with milk and honey. Their trek extended over several years; they endured almost unexampled privations and troubles from thirst, fevers, and the attacks of natives; scores of them died; they lost the greater portion of their stock, and abandoned many wagons; some turned back, and only a comparatively small remnant emerged from the perils of this unparalleled trek. After wandering about the western regions of the Kalahari, the Okavango country, and Ovampoland, they crossed the Cunene River and entered Portuguese territory.

Here they were well treated. They were allotted farms and encouraged to colonize the country, and many families did actually settle down at Humpata. Since that time-about the beginning of 1881-these Trek Boers and their descendants had accepted their lot in the new country and become Portuguese

subjects. They tilled the ground, ranched cattle, sheep, and goats, rode transport (that is, carried goods) to and from Mossamedes and Benguela, hunted elephants for their ivory, and other kinds of game for their skins and flesh. Latterly, as we have seen, they had been assisting the Portuguese in native wars. For this kind of warfare they were excellently well adapted, being good shots and riders, and well versed in every trick and circumstance of veldt fighting. The Portuguese had, in fact, found them highly satisfactory auxiliaries, and the unfortunate natives-too often treated with the grossest unfairness and trickery by all parties-terrible enemies.

Among the Trek Boers of Humpata and the neighbouring country were many decent, deserving, and well-conducted people, who were only anxious to make a fair and honest living out of the country. A leaven of them, however, were mere filibusters and adventurers, cruel, cunning, and deceitful, ready to overreach and rob any man, especially if he had a black skin, and always prepared to use their rifles on small provocation. Among these was to be reckoned Karl Engelbrecht, who, even among these lawless spirits, had acquired a sinister reputation. Most of these Dutch settlers were fine, big, upstanding men, strong, bold, hardy, and athletic-as indeed they might well be; for they and their families represented the survival of the fittest, after one of the most trying and adventurous passages on record. Their seven years of wandering had, in truth, weeded out all the weak ones, and left alive only the toughest and hardiest of a tough

and hardy race.

For the next few days Mr. Blakeney and his party were busied in pushing on their preparations for the trek. They filled the lower part of the wagon with various stores and provisions-meal, coffee, sugar, tinned provisions, jams, vegetables, and other small luxuries. They laid in also dried onions, always useful on an expedition of this kind, where green vegetables are unprocurable, as well as a bag or two of potatoes. They carried also sacks of mealies and Kaffir corn (the latter a kind of millet) with which to feed the horses. They anticipated a good deal of hunting; and you cannot pursue game on horseback, and run down giraffe, eland, and other fleet creatures, unless your nags are well fed and in good condition. This fact Guy had already become aware of during his stay in British Bechuanaland. Their saddlery, ammunition, guns and rifles had come round with them from Cape Town. Juno, their invaluable pointer, was also of the party. Juno seemed to be getting keener and keener as each day passed; she watched anxiously the loading of the wagon, and was evidently only too desirous to have the whole party out in the veldt. A good light tent had been procured, and Mr. Blakeney's kartel fixed up in the wagon. All was now ready for the trek, which they hoped to begin next day.

During these preparations they necessarily, moving as they did freely about the small seaport of Mossamedes, passed Karl Engelbrecht and his boon companions in close proximity. After his severe lesson the Boer, who was a coward at bottom, did

not dare to attempt any further liberties with the Englishmen or their servants; but he scowled evilly as he passed, and had always some savage remark to make to his friends-delivered carefully in an undertone-as they went by. Mr. Blakeney and the two lads, for their part, took not the slightest notice of the freebooters; even Poeskop, strong in his reliance upon his English protectors, held his head well in the air, and assumed an air of supercilious indifference, which perhaps in his secret heart he felt was not altogether justified. For Poeskop, undoubtedly, knowing his former master and his evil ways so well, still retained within his soul certain secret quakings as he thought of or set eyes upon Karl Engelbrecht.

"My young baas," he would say to Guy, as they sighted the big, burly ruffian, "he is *slim*, and he is strong, and he is cruel. And he will try to make us suffer for his black eyes, which he still carries, the *schelm!* and his bleeding nose. *Maghte!* but it was good as a sackful of honey[1] to see Karl Engelbrecht floored by Baas Blackenny" (he always mispronounced the word), "and it does me good still to see his battered face."

Then he would croon to himself in his croaking voice: "But we shall suffer, we shall suffer; Karl Engelbrecht is planning something; Poeskop knows it, ay, he knows it. Well, Poeskop will look out. He sleep always like the *muishond* [a kind of weasel], with one eye open."

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[1] Honey is often carried by the natives in skin bags.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.